Stories of the Self: Religious and Cultural Struggles of a Muslim Child Welfare Researcher

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Abstract: The child welfare system, higher education, and being Muslim are three aspects of my identity that required close examination to understand my encounters during my PhD research. I withstood challenges based on religious and cultural differences in my fostering and frontline child protection work. Insight into these challenges emerged through my research, which examined experiences of Muslims clients receiving child welfare services in Ontario. The project provided an opportunity to reflect on frictions between my religious identification, my academic institution, and a child welfare organization. Grounding my framework in the sociocultural context for Muslims, I discuss aspects of my research that details interpersonal interactions with the child welfare system and academia. To synthesize three aspects of my social positioning—student, researcher, and child welfare worker—I outline the struggles of a Canadian Muslim identity. I use reflexivity to discuss narratives of my encounters in various phases of the research process.

***Keywords*:** child protection services, colonization, Islam, Islamophobia, reflexivity

Introduction

Social work has its roots in 19th century Christian theology (e.g., the work of Walter Rauschenbusch) and philanthropy and is historically connected to organized Christianity (Graham et al., 2006). Graham and Shier (2009) point to a nexus between social work and religion, yet the emergence of social work as a profession in the Western world is grounded within a secular scientific paradigm that is primarily shaped and regulated by academia and professional bodies. Religion has been largely ignored, and scholars contend that there is reluctance and discomfort among social workers and other human service professionals to engage with religion (e.g., Gilligan & Furness, 2006; Godina, 2014; Hodge, 2005; Streets, 2009; Thyer & Myers, 2009).

For Muslims, this problem is compounded by pervasive stereotypes. Literature suggests that Muslims and Islamic communities in the West are experiencing an escalation of anti-Muslim sentiments and a rise in Islamophobia (e.g., Allen, 2010; Geddes, 2013; Gottschalk & Greenberg, 2007; Kundani, 2014; Razack, 2008; Sharify-Funk, 2013; Zempi & Chakraborti, 2014; Zine, 2001, 2006). In the Canadian context, Arat-Koc (2005) suggests, "following September 11, the definition and boundaries of Canadian national identity and belonging were reconfigured" (p. 33). The reconfiguration produced a socio-political atmosphere that defined Muslims as unquestionably "the other."

Grounding the framework for my PhD research in the sociocultural context for Muslims, I examine Muslim clients' encounters with the child welfare system in Ontario. In this paper, I outline the construction of Canadian Muslim identity as the "other" to provide context for the final piece, "Stories of the Self." Using reflexivity as part of my methodology to grapple with

my "otherness"—not only as a Muslim researcher but also as a researcher working with Muslim participants—facilitated a deep dive into the final piece. In said section, I use creative narrative to discuss my experiences and internal processes throughout the research and writing of my PhD dissertation.

Positionality—*My* Connections with Child Welfare

I am an immigrant, Muslim woman with over 30 years of history with the child welfare system in Ontario. My connection with child welfare started with the role of fostering; I thought that this would be a good opportunity to open our home to "less fortunate" children and provide good life lessons for my four biological children. In Islam, we are taught that children are like *walis* (friends of God) and are a sacred trust. My family and I settled into fostering through the alternate care program, which secured placement for special needs children (those with autism, Down's syndrome, fetal alcohol syndrome, and other complicated, sometimes unnamed childhood developmental challenges). There was congruence between what I was doing and my beliefs. The families we worked with were happy to have the Children's Aid Society's (CAS) involvement and became extended parts of our own family.

I had no intention of working as a child protection worker, as over 10 years of fostering had given me insight into how challenging the work is, but ended up doing so. Within a year as a child protection worker, I felt negatively impacted by the work and could not reconcile much of what was required of me as "protecting children." I noticed disturbing patterns that reflected systemic problems where poor and racialized families were treated more harshly. I found the court process particularly intimidating for families. Gradually, case by case, I lost my ability to feel whole while I continued the work.

Additionally, I began to feel the impact of clients' and coworkers' perceptions of me. Clients complained about my inability to speak English and my lack of knowledge about Canada in racist and derogatory ways. In one memorable incident, my 14-year-old client—with great self-awareness and insight—called my supervisor to request another worker, because he considered himself "racist." I was removed from the case partly because of his request, but mostly because of the group home supervisor's call to the agency with concerns for my safety. Was this in some way connected to Islamophobia?

Working as a child protection worker, I had little time to care for families and children. The emphasis was on meeting deadlines and assessing risks in ways that took away the relationality of interactions. As much as the agency culture perpetuated the culture of "saving children," I knew that I was not saving children. What is more, I realized that I, as part of the system, was implicated in perpetuating the inequities and continued state colonizing of folks deemed "risky." Ten years and two organizations later, I resigned from the agency with no plan in mind as my concerns grew into anxiety that agitated my soul.

However, child welfare followed me into my PhD, which was not a lifelong dream but a hoped-for escape. Researching child welfare seemed equally challenging. This brought in the insider/outsider conundrum because it is essential to document shared and divergent experiences

between participants and researchers (Berger, 2015; Dodgson, 2019; Teh & Lek, 2018). While I could be considered an insider and felt that I had considerable connections with the system through my over 20 years of fostering and frontline protection work, I was a definite outsider. This feeling emerged through the reluctance of CAS organizations to engage in the study. As a result, recruiting participants proved difficult with rejections from 10 child welfare organizations.

Recruiting through the Muslim community was an equally alienating process, though for a different reason. Fear of anything to do with child protection was an explanation for potential participants to abstain regardless of their positions in the Mosque or their personal experiences as clients, foster parents, or workers in the child welfare system. Eventually, I was able to recruit one family through a community agency. This young family fled from war to ensure their safety, but as the father stated, after the treacherous journey to get here, he lost his children. The story he told was difficult to listen to, transcribe, and analyze. As I immersed myself in the story, I got lost. Objectivity seemed impossible; subjectivity intertwined. We shared that Muslim identity in Canada where Muslims are viewed in a particular way.

The Canadian Muslim Identity

Iterations of a Canadian Muslim identity might link Muslims to their nationality, ancestry, and ethnicity. However, aspects of individual and group identity are shaped by religion for Muslims in the West. Previously considered ethnic minorities, Muslims are now a distinct religious group (Nash, 2012). Religion is increasingly being noted as a salient identity marker among Muslims, particularly in the aftermath of September 11 (Nash, 2012; Peek, 2005; Sadek, 2017; Verkuyten & Yildiz, 2007). The evolution of identity is a complicated process, as Bhabha (2004) puts it: "Identity is never as an a priori, nor a finished product" (p. 51). Identification for Muslims is based on attitudes of intolerance; being "Muslim" appears to be both an a priori and a finished product and can be easily understood in the literature on perceptions of Muslims (e.g., Nash, 2012; Razack, 2007; Zempi & Chakraborti, 2014).

The Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC, 2005, 2017) identifies characteristics that include name, dress, language, place of origin, beliefs, and practices as traits used to judge others as abnormal. Such identity markers (e.g., names on the no-fly list and *hijab*) have always been problematic for the Muslim community but continue to surface. For example, the conservative Anti-Terror Bill—with its economic action plan of close to 300 million dollars (Government of Canada, n.d.) allocated to law enforcement agencies in the fight against terrorism—frames Muslim minorities as a hostile fringe that requires increased surveillance. Further, the focus by state actors on extremism and radicalization as explanations for terrorism compounds exclusionary practices for Muslims (Sajoo, 2016).

Arat-Koc (2005) argues, "following September 11, the definition and boundaries of Canadian national identity and belonging were reconfigured" (p. 33). The reconfiguration produced a socio-political atmosphere that defined Muslim identity as unquestionably not of "the West." Canadian Muslim women are excluded from the construction of Canadian identity (Bullock & Jafri, 2000). Canadian women's first-world identity—viewed as progressive, modern, and

liberated—contrasts with Muslim women usually identified as immigrants from the third world. Practices associated with Islam are seen as an importation of backward practices, with the result of reinforcing the orientalist paradigm of Muslims as un-Canadian (Bullock & Jafri, 2000). The development of a Canadian Muslim identity involves social interaction and engagement with others. Frequently believed to be unwilling to integrate, Canadian Muslims continue to be a significant part of the fabric of Canadian society (Kazemipur, 2014; Zempi & Chakraborti, 2014) that occupy the periphery.

Sadek (2017) speaks about subjectivity within the cultural context and suggests that both the collective and individual Muslim identities are at risk of collapsing due to the internalizing of various aspects of Islamophobia. She further argues that such a collapse that is mediated by shame can cause foreclosure or idealizing of Muslim identities—constructing an enduring Muslim identity where shame and fear are present and intersections of race, ethnicity, age, and gender add to negative self-concept for Muslims. Shame is part of the child welfare experience, with clients already marginalized and with Islamophobia on the rise (Minsky, 2017).

Like internalized racism, Islamophobia affects Muslims on a psychological level due to overwhelming pressures of surveillance, hate crimes, and institutional discrimination (Amer & Bagasra, 2013; Nadal et al., 2012). The Canadian Muslim community is experiencing a shift in generation, with an increasing and struggling youth population. While some argue that Muslim youths tend to assimilate and take on the identity of their new home and value learning and participation (Moghissi et al., 2009; Saunders, 2012), they also experience Islamophobia. Parents and students report racism and Islamophobia, for example, stones being thrown at girls wearing hijab and parents being requested to change their children's names (Zine, 2001). This triggers complex and layered challenges for Muslims involved in child welfare services.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity and reflexive practice are core components in social work research and practice (Dodgson, 2019; Watts, 2019). They form a strategy used as a quality control approach (Berger, 2015) and considered one way to establish trustworthiness and rigour and deepen others' understanding of one's work (Dodgson, 2019). I used epistemological reflexivity, which encourages the researcher to reflect on their assumptions and capacity to influence and be influenced by the research process (Dowling, 2006). Reflexivity is viewed as a challenging and important aspect of research. From an academic standpoint, reflection and reflexivity were new ideas to me, but in my personal life, they were not. In Islam, constant monitoring of the *nafs* (ego) towards moral and ethical choices in everyday life and an awareness that one is accountable to God are important. My project presented the opportunity of merging my personal and scholarly reflexive practices.

Understanding my identity as a Muslim woman and how it shaped my research project allowed me to make further links between my religious/spiritual self and my academic endeavors. I cognize similarities and differences as suggested by Dodgson (2019), with the family and myself that brought into conscious awareness the family's experiences as new Canadians of Arab descent to be very different from my experience. I also consider the vast difference between

being a foster parent and a worker to that of a client receiving services. It became clear that in my case study, the principal participants responded to me as a person of influence (Mitchell et al., 2018), but what became clearer is that they responded to me as a Muslim, within a faith community where commonality brings with it trust. This trust was necessary for their story to be told given the trauma they faced in with child welfare interventions. The following sections are narratives that tell stories from my reflexive practice about aspects of my research including theory, research paradigm, and methodology.

Stories of the Self

In "Stories of the Self," I encapsulate interactions and emotions evoked from participants and systems through the different stages of the research. For example, in the first section, I articulate my struggles to find epistemological congruences with the theories that permeate social work. The second part expresses the complex intersections between child welfare and religion as it pertains to marginalized clients. The third suggests that the Canadian context with Islamophobia as a salient factor creates negative experiences for participants and researchers alike. The fourth segment is aligned with my methodology and conveys the systemic struggles that evolved, while the fifth portion is situated within my findings and elucidates the interchanges between myself and the participant. The final section is a reflection on colonialism in Canada as it pertains to child welfare and emerged from my thoughts during the writing of my discussions.

What is My Theory?

> Most areas of intellectual life have discovered the virtues of speculation and have embraced them wildly. In academia, speculation is usually dignified as theory.
>
> —Michael Crichton, *State of Fear*

Perhaps the position of a Muslim researcher in a Western institution is a paradoxical one. In the doctoral program, we are frequently told that a "theoretical perspective" is necessary to frame social work research. There are many to choose from and one can easily get lost in the array of social work. At the beginning of my search for theories that fit, I was traversing an unknown swamp with scary things hidden in wait to pounce on unsuspecting intruders. I felt unable to navigate the swamp. The map to avoid danger and stay safe seemed like it was written in a foreign language. The codes were inaccessible. Now, do I stop? Turn back? If I continue, will I be devoured? Will I lose my identity and become one of the minions that keep the swamp alive?

And what of people who are more grounded in an alternative paradigm that cannot fit with the Western construction of "acceptable" theories? I feel like I have imposter syndrome. Not in the same way as my PhD colleagues; for many of them, imposter syndrome is a sense of inadequacy despite their success as students and emerging scholars. For me, imposter syndrome is more like being somewhere you don't belong because there is not much that is familiar to me. So little reflects my identity in the secular hegemonic spaces and ideas.

I don't have the luxury of thinking fully from an Islamic perspective because the dominant secular perspectives prevail in academia. And this feels like a structural barrier. My "theories"

springing from Divine revelation and grounded in theology are rarely welcomed in this space. Sometimes I seem to be speaking a "foreign language" in an inaudible voice. And sometimes I hear a foreign language I cannot understand. Can I be heard and understood? Do I belong?

It seems to me that I have more in common with other systems or frameworks of looking at the world. I find comfort in the First Nations' perspectives of connectedness, collectiveness, community, and caring. This is familiar. This familiarity brings on another anxiety. In attempting to conform, am I misrepresenting myself or, more importantly, my participant? This man whose life was turned upside-down by his experiences, yet was willing to participate in the research? Will I find space for his voice that speaks for both of us with clarity and conviction?

The struggles I encountered to find a participant was only resolved when I belonged. I belonged, not in academia, not as a child welfare professional, nor as a researcher. I belonged to the family's world. I heard their voices, their heartbreaking pain of separation, their tragic stories of oppression, and their disturbing concerns about injustice. And then I hear their voice of hope, and trust, and reliance on Allah (God). And somehow, they trusted me with their story. How do I filter it through paradigms and frameworks that don't seem to fit? How do I retell their story in their voice? Can I convey their trauma? Their hope in Allah?

How "Being Muslim" Shows Up in Child Welfare

> I wonder how I can move about in two such different worlds in the space of a single day.
> —Paulo Coelho, "A Day at the Mill"

Two very different worlds—child welfare and Islam. Where do these worlds intersect? Who resides in the intersection, and how do they manage to keep their balance? Child welfare is self-evident and reflects a concern for the welfare of children. Islam, on the other hand, is not so discernible although it is a major world religion. It means different things to different people. One popular construction of Islam in the West is that it is synonymous with terrorism and has abusive practices toward women and children. In this construction, Islam is bent on the destruction of liberal democracies. However, there are other ways to understand Islam and explore how it brings moral and ethical conduct to the forefront in the welfare of children.

The Prophet Muhammad (upon him Peace and Blessings), the example that Muslims strive to emulate, strongly encouraged caring for orphans and needy children. An example was left for us in the Prophet's care of Ali, his young cousin who lived with him. The story of Ali in the home of the Prophet is a story of love, patience, preference of the child over himself, and nurturing care. Love and care were so established and secured that the child experienced joy in his presence. Inspired by my world of Islam, I entered the world of child welfare as a foster mother.

While fostering, I experienced the child welfare system from the perspective of a Muslim. As I recall, encounters with "apprehended" children placed in my home were complicated, disheartening, and traumatic. I remember two young brothers, ages eight and four. They didn't know why they had to leave their home nor when they were going back. The older one stood by the window for three days. Crying, sobbing, pleading. Looking out onto the street. The younger

one stood next to his brother. Perplexed, confused, and afraid. Timidly attempting to console his older brother. I could not even offer these children a phone call to their parents; that was against the rules. As a mother, it was easy to put myself in their parents' position. Words fail to convey feelings. How are their parents surviving without knowing where their children are or who is caring for them?

My frontline child protection work was marred with complaints to my supervisors about difficulties understanding my accent, my inability to speak English, and my lack of knowledge about Canada and Canadian laws. In one incident, a 14-year-old client—with great self-awareness and insight—called my supervisor to request another worker, because he considered himself racist and hated Muslims. I was removed from the case. In this and other instances, the power associated with the child protection worker gave way to the marginalization of my Muslim identity.

As I continued this child welfare journey in the academic realm, I encountered the two worlds of Islam and child welfare most profoundly. While there is a prolific body of literature on the protection and safety of children in Islam and in child welfare—these exist as separate, disconnected, and distant from each other, with minimal points of conversions and intersections. Yet, central to both is the concern for children's well-being. Being a Muslim and working in child welfare continues to be a place of liminality. A place where I am marginalized because I am a Muslim and feared because I am a child protection worker.

On Being a Muslim Canadian

> We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another.
>
> —Jonathan Swift, *Thoughts on Various Subjects*

I am a Muslim who lives in Ontario. I have lived in Ontario for over 40 years. Does that make me a Canadian Muslim? A Muslim Canadian? These questions may seem insignificant, a matter of semantics, but they do matter to me. Sometimes they matter just as something to ruminate on; this ongoing process of contemplation frames my sense of belonging. At other times they become salient, even urgent. It is strange how this happens—depending on the space I occupy at the time and with whom I share that space.

Is this just me? Or do other Muslims feel the same? These may be questions I cannot answer. What I know, though, is that once identified by others as Muslims, we share a sense of dread, and the same monster haunts us. I know this because it is the story I hear over and over from my children and their children. I hear it from my elders, my sisters, and brothers. I hear it at home and at the Mosque communities. Sometimes I can even see it in the quick glances and barely audible salaams of other Muslims whom I do not know. I see my community, my family, and myself in the grasp of this "monstrous" thing. It is growing, gaining strength, potency, and power. Once you are identified as Muslim, it is easy to be singled out.

Islamophobia has been with us for a while before the 9/11 attack, as evidenced by responses to the Timothy McVeigh bombing (Ward & Pilat, 2016), but 9/11 was a pivotal incident. During the 9/11 attacks, I recall the horror with which I watched the Twin Towers go down. I was in an MSW class, and someone came in to call us all to the auditorium to see "history happening." Apprehension steps in. God, please don't let it be Muslims! But it is. What will this mean for us Muslims who live in Canada? I remember leaving class early that day and hoping for invisibility as I made my way through Union station. I worried about the safety of my children; will they make it home safely? What consequences might this have for the Muslim community?

Remembering this, I reflect on the dismembering of Muslims from Canadian society. We are "others." It does not matter that we are tax-paying, civic-minded, educated professionals contributing to our local community and the Canadian collective. We are "others." And with this comes a dislocation from being Canadian. I am reminded of Du Bois's (1897/2011) deliberation in "Strivings of the Negro People." He speaks of an unasked question—"how does it feel to be the problem?" I experience this often. People seem suspicious, nervous, uncomfortable, and unwilling to engage. Imagine someone wearing hijab showing up at the home of a Canadian client as the "family service worker" from CAS. The client is already nervous and uncomfortable with a worker coming to their home. Now the added dimension of this person who is "not one of us" is here. After they have processed their feelings, the questions and unsavory comments start. You are not Canadian! Why are you here? What do you know about Canada and Canadian law? I want a new worker!

Sadly, it does not end there. Sometimes they call my supervisors with complaints.
My professionalism, civic-mindedness, language skills, and compassion are all hidden under my hijab from my clients and my supervisors. I recollected an incident with a particular supervisor who was not at all surprised that a client called with a complaint that she could not understand my accent; my supervisor admitted that she sometimes has trouble with my accent. I am a native English speaker. Discrimination and marginalization don't end with education and professionalism.

As a child protection worker, I have power. However, my Muslim identity tempers the power. I wonder: What might a Muslim client feel in this double jeopardy of being a Muslim and a CAS client? Two positions of relative powerlessness. For some of us, and in certain instances, the monster is bigger, more terrifying, and ever-present. And the consequences can be devastating.

Roadblocks and Red Tape

> Dear Government … I'm going to have a serious talk with you if I ever find anyone to talk to.
>
> —Stieg Larsson, *The Girl Who Played with Fire*

I entered my research with a clear focus and much passion. From the project's conceptualization, I encountered enthusiasm from professors, advisors, mentors, and colleagues in the field. It is a "great idea," some said. This is "much-needed work," others commented. Child welfare agencies were no less enthusiastic; people were willing to share the "good work"

they were doing with Muslim families. Agencies invited me to connect when I was ready for data collection because of the project's merits and anticipated usefulness. After all, folks in the field appreciate the suffocating apprehension felt by people, particularly disadvantaged people, when they come up against the powerful government institution of child welfare. Literature attests to this (Baksh, 2022; Alaggia & Maiter, 2012), as do the child welfare professionals I have known and worked with, and public opinion too (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2017).

Reflecting on my encounters in the field, I cannot fathom all the roadblocks and red tape I experienced. To me, it was a simple matter. I wanted to be able to speak to ways in which Muslim clients encounter child welfare intervention. I had worked through the research ethics board requirements, which were very thorough. So, I should be able to connect with an agency or two—those agencies that I had been talking to since working on my comprehensive paper, those agencies that I had worked at prior, and those agencies that invited me to return when I was ready for data collection.

However, this did not happen. I met with rejection after rejection. Explanations and excuses: We have our own research. We cannot breach client confidentiality by giving out information. We are unable to contact past clients. We cannot ask workers to take time off their work. Sorry, we are unable to help you—but good luck with your research! Is it luck that I need? What is the message here? Agencies seemed shrouded in secrecy. Unyielding. The resistance reflected a very guarded approach. It is as if the system needs to be protected. But from whom and for what reasons? Research is supposed to create crucial knowledge and identify opportunities to enhance services. Is this about child welfare being resistant to change?

I realized that if I wanted to continue the project, I needed to look at this differently. So off I went back to ethics to get clearance for community recruitment. Oh, the Muslim community! My community would be helpful. Families are sufficiently angry with CAS and would want to talk. Within the Muslim community, the reluctance was similar, but the reasons for the reluctance were evidently different. Again, silence! Failed attempts. No responses to flyers, posts, or announcements. Wait, there were two responses.

One man called within minutes of hearing the announcement at the Friday prayer. We made an appointment, which he cancelled within an hour. He never responded to subsequent calls. I connected with a Muslim worker who was willing and happy to participate, but wanted to check with management at her agency for permission. The worker felt that "management was reluctant," and she would not talk without approval.

I can fully understand and appreciate the case of the Muslim worker. Divided loyalties. She needed her job and could not risk upsetting management. I am not sure of the man's reasons to withdraw, but his initial willingness to talk was quickly reduced to silence and invisibility. Likewise, my communications with Mosques and Muslim organizations ended with "no one will talk to you; they are afraid." CAS has the power to intimidate and evoke fear.

Eventually, I found parents willing to take the risk and participate. My worry is, did I do justice to their story? By telling it the way I did, did I confirm stereotypes of Muslim men and women? He talks, she is silent (or silenced?). As a Muslim woman, I value my privacy, and there are times when I speak up and times I remain silent. Not because I must, but mostly because I feel that I won't be heard. I wonder if this is the case with her and if so, what is it about me that could not provide the safety that a faith community does in relationships with each other? Did she see me more as a child welfare person than a Muslim?

A Believer is the Reflection of Another Believer

Here I am in this research process that has brought me face-to-face with a family who shares my religious beliefs. A belief that sets us apart from the people around us. It sets us apart from colleagues and neighbors. It sets us apart in the wider society where we interface with public institutions like schools, hospitals, and courthouses—even when using public transportation. It sets us apart in ways that leave us feeling misunderstood, marginalized, rejected, feared, and always an outsider and "othered."

But I am engaging in these conversations as a researcher, and "Ahmad" is a participant. Though we may have similar beliefs and values, in this situation I hold power. On the other hand, he has had his power stripped. As a Muslim parent, the effort he made to protect his child from harm appeared controlling and abusive by the "child protection people," people like me, formerly associated with the child welfare system—those people who took his children out of his home to a place unknown. He fled the war with his family, and they remained a family. But here, where he was promised refuge and safety, his children were taken from his home. His pregnant wife was taken to prison. He did not know why; he could not understand the charges against him and his wife. But he was still willing to talk to another one of those "child protection people."

I am sure that the family was only open to me as a researcher because I am a Muslim. We reflect each other and are equal before God; this is our Islamic belief. Yet, they had no reason to trust anyone who is part of this system that traumatized them as much as—maybe even more—than the war they had fled. When I thanked him for consenting to participate. Ahmad's words reflected a Prophetic custom. He asserted that he would do anything he could, so another Muslim family does not experience the pain, grief, anger, and loss he and his wife endured. His wife, "Elnaz"—a woman I understood through Ahmad's narrative to be inspiringly resilient—was unable to talk. She sat through all the interviews and listened to her husband tell their story. And she cried. Was I exploiting their pain for a PhD?

Somehow their pain became mine. As a Muslim and a former child protection worker, I had borne my own, but nothing like this. For the first time, I could appreciate vicarious trauma. During my time as a child protection worker when other (mainly white, younger, middle-class) workers spoke of vicarious trauma, I would secretly seethe. Really! You talk about trauma? What about the people whose trauma is "actual," not vicarious? But the stories told in the interviews were excruciating to hear and painful to process. So now I know "vicarious trauma" is a real thing.

Aside from the distress of listening to Ahmad's story, I am anxious about having crossed the line between being Muslim and being a researcher. How will I manage a problem when research ethics and Islamic ethics are at odds? Protecting the rights and dignity of participants is my duty as a researcher. If I act on my values and instinct as a Muslim, then it is incumbent on me to assist, but how? Is this relationship a primary researcher participant or is Ahmad my brother in faith?

Ahmad was able to center this horrible experience in his religion and draw strength for himself and his family. He referred to "Allah's control over everything" to make sense of the experience. His unshakable faith in God's absolute power and God's control steadied him. Oh, he felt his share of anger, guilt, frustration, and shame. But he found courage in small triumphs that he held on to. His child ran away from care—and came back to him. For him, this showed that he was a good parent and that she wanted to be with her family. Family meant everything to him. His faith helped him to survive the disruption that threatened to destroy his family. It made him an Elnaz, strong in the face of what they considered to be as dire a situation as the war they left behind.

Reflections on Colonialism in Canada

> It is not our differences which separate [us], but our reluctance to recognize those differences and to to deal effectively with the distortions which have resulted from the ignoring and misnaming of those differences.
>
> —Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*

It is with a heavy heart that I contemplate the current socio-political context of Canada. With the number of unmarked graves well above a thousand in Saskatchewan and British Colombia and possibly more to come in other provinces, I wonder why? How? Why were the children ripped away from their families; placed in torturous situations where they experienced physical, psychological, and sexual abuse; and disappeared without acknowledgement of their extinction to their families?

They had their way of life before the colonizers disembarked on Turtle Island. They had a way of life that celebrated nature, connections, honoring the past, living in the present, and preserving the future. They loved and cared for their children. What about any of this needed to be "civilized"? They seemed much more civilized than those seeking to civilize them. This is not about differences, not about civilizing people, but more about domination. It was about power and control. It was about usurping land for material benefits. The residential schools were a means for the state to forcibly separate children from their families and communities. The child protection system was complicit and instrumental in removing children from their families.

Imagine a Canada where the last residential school was operational until 1996! This was not what my children were learning in school, though. They didn't even hear of the Sixties Scoop[1].

[1] Refers to colonialist 1960s- to 1980s-era Canadian policies which allowed widespread "scooping" of Indigenous children from their families and cultures into the child welfare system (Okanagan College Library, n.d.).

But that was a long time ago, right? Not so long when I translate it to a historic chronology parallel to my life. By 1996, I had already lived in Canada for 14 years. My youngest child was already over six years old. And although I was an involved, inquisitive person engaging with my children's schools and attending university, I was unaware of the scope and depth of impact residential schools had on First Nations communities. And as child welfare scholars examining First Nations experiences of the system will tell you, the Millennium Scoop[2] continues to surface in child welfare outcomes for First Nations families. Oh Canada, whose native Land are you?

Oh Canada—open and welcoming to immigrants. You declared multiculturalism under the Trudeau government since 1971 with policies promoting equitable participation by 1985 (Canadian Multiculturalism Act, 1985). Yet the original owners and keepers of the land were being oppressed. Cultural erasure, cultural genocide, ongoing geocide, while you looked so good to the world! This multiculturalism that you espouse and are admired for globally is rooted in exclusionary, colonizing processes that caused you to ignore First Nations' plights (Blackstock, 2016; Blackstock et al., 2020). Maybe it is easier to evade the disastrous outcomes and consequences of things that we are ashamed of. As if it is not enough that you have oppressed and murdered the hosts who generously shared their lands and home with you. You are now turning on the guests you happily invited through your generous immigration policies (Lenard, 2021). Immigrants are welcome—they can settle in your beautiful space; refugees are welcome, too—you sponsor them and assist them with settling (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, n.d.). How Canadian eh!

The new wave of Islamophobia has taken a personal toll. I know the London Muslim community. I have spent time in the Mosque and admired the mural painted by 15-year-old Yumna Salman before she was the victim of the Islamophobic attack that left three generations of one family killed (Ghouse, 2025). Recently, I received an email from an old Christian friend asking the question: How does a 20-year-old ever have that much hate inside him that he would murder a family he does not even know? Based on their religion? I cannot find a suitable answer. Perhaps because they are different? Because he feels they pose a threat? Because racism and xenophobia are alive and well in our Canada? Maybe he felt he was standing on guard for Thee, Oh Canada.

I cannot help but wonder whether Ahmad's story would be the same if his differences were not so many, so pronounced, so undesirable, so unCanadian. My instinctive answer is a loud, resounding "no." The instinct is likely more akin to epistemic knowledge. Is this how colonization continues? You can be here, but you can't be who you are. Ahmad was welcomed, but his welcome only lasted until he was "caught" adhering to traditional values and religious practices. His race and ethnicity didn't help. Ahmad felt that his children were taken without just cause. And what is more, while in the care of child welfare, his daughter was subjected to similar rules that he was punished for by being arrested, having his children removed, being

[2] Refers to the ongoing overrepresentation of Indigenous children seen in the child welfare system after the Sixties Scoop (Okanagan College Library, n.d.).

placed on the child abuse registry, losing his jobs and his unborn child. Oh Canada—"Land of hope for all who toil?" (Weir, 1908, stanza 2, line 5).

Conclusion

So many things seem impossible until they are done; this is said of great things like political upheavals, but smaller things like my research project seemed impossible, too. It was an opportunity to reflect on the usual conceptual friction between religion, a government organization predicated on providing services, and the academy. I struggled with the fact that as a part of the child welfare system, my interventions into the lives of families to protect children from harm ended up causing greater harm. This experience caused me continuously to re-evaluate the usefulness of my research. There were many times along the way I wanted to quit as similar work with other marginalized groups has been done before, but the system remains persistently incorrigible despite ample research and transformation agendas. Instead, it is entrenched in a particular way that continues to criminalize and oppress certain segments of the population.

Like all families, Muslims must accept child welfare interventions as it is a government-mandated service. When providing services, though, the realities of Islamophobia must be considered to accommodate Muslim communities within a framework of how they understand themselves. Muslims have a body of scholarship drawn from religious teachings and traditions on managing child safety and protection. Incorporating their knowledge is vital to serve this population effectively, and stereotypes of Muslims as less than—even barbaric—must be challenged. This implies that the historic and sociopolitical context rooted in colonization, neoliberalism, and secularism of child protection services and higher education needs to be revised. This seems impossible—and will remain impossible until it is done.

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